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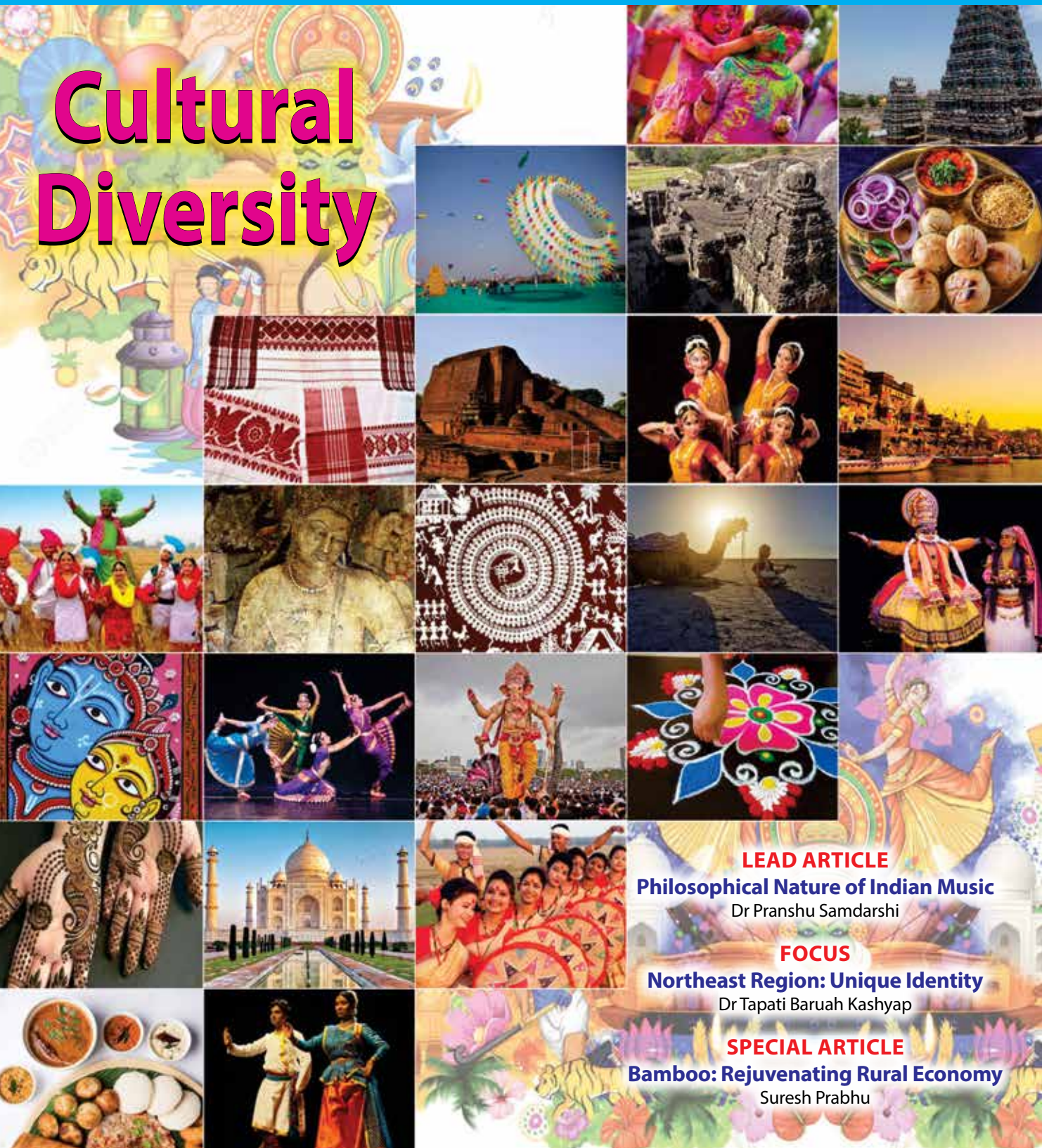
# YOJANA

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## Cultural Diversity



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# Philosophical Nature of Indian Music

*Dr Pranshu Samdarshi*

Indian classical music has contributed in a significant way towards the development of the composite culture of India. Besides, with regards to Indian classical music, it should be noted that the term ‘classical’ only suggests that it has its foundations in the standard convention or *shāstra*, in accordance with the textual tradition. The Indian name for this music is *ShāstriyaSangīt*. It is sometimes also known as *Rāga Sangīt* since it is the *Rāga* that is at the centre of the structure of this art form. Thus, the term ‘classical’ doesn’t connote any old style or a specific time period, as the way it exists in the Western tradition.

**T**he Indian classical music, be it Hindustani or Carnatic, has essentially got a spiritual component inherent in it. This music intends to give an elevating experience which transports its listeners to an abstract and sublime domain. Although, many great traditions of music across the globe have a direct or indirect connection with some sort of spirituality, nevertheless, Indian classical music lays upon it a very special emphasis.

Tracing down the history of Indian music, one would find that since ancient times, temples have been providing a platform for many diverse forms of the artistic expressions of Classical music. And, it was *Bhakti* or selfless devotion that was the underlying essence of the various art forms that developed in India. The artistic principles of Indian classical music are formulated and structured in such a way that it becomes an inward journey for its practitioners so that they get intimately connected with their within. This is one of the reasons why the word “spiritual” is frequently used in describing Indian classical music.

Indian classical music has emerged from a mythical or legendary past that was before recorded history. We can agree that legends are not exact facts, we also know that this does not mean that they cannot be real at some other level. The reality can manifest itself in the inner experience. Musicians with a profound understanding of Indian heritage, its associated symbols, and myths, use the structure of the music and the words of the composition

that are often rooted in mythology, to move into the abstract, subtle, inspiring, and mystical domains.

## *Nāadopāsanā* - The Invocation of the Primordial Sound

For a true practitioner of classical music, the approach used to be *Nāadopāsanā* - the invocation of the primordial sound. For these practitioners, music became an internal journey for the realisation of the ultimate truth. Such practitioners of classical music tried not to sing or play for the audience. Even when they were giving a public performance, they got elevated to the very high points within themselves which consequently uplifted the audience taking them into the domains that they never experienced before. Thus, the performer as well as the audience, both experienced the true *rasa* of classical music.

For these practitioners of music, even the selection of the *Rāga* and the composition at the time of a performance was a result of the intuition and the inspiration of the moment. For example, it is said that the late Dhrupad

**If one listens with undivided attention to the sounds of stringed musical instruments that are played successively and are prolonged, then one becomes absorbed in the supreme consciousness.**

**- Shiva to Parvati in  
*Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra*<sup>1</sup>**

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*Bismillah Khan*



*Pt. Hari Prasad Chaurasia*

exponent Ustad Nasir Aminuddin Dagar, before going to a SPIC MACAY programme, was once asked what Rāga he had decided to sing. He is reported to have replied, “the tanpura will tell me which raga I have to sing”. That is why so much time was spent with Tanpura in the greenroom. This might sound strange these days but it has been a reality for many great masters of Indian classical music.

Thus, for such practitioners of music, their art form was not to provide mere entertainment but it became a medium to pass on their profound experiences to the listeners.

### **The Guru-Shishya and Gharānā tradition**

The Guru-Shishya *parampara* is another crucial feature which is common for all the classical music traditions of India. For centuries, this Guru-shishya transmission has made it possible to carry forward the intense experiences innately embedded in this great tradition of enlightened practitioners of music. A great Guru is the amalgamation of thousands of years of wisdom. It requires a lot of sacrifice, tremendous staying power, and faith on the part of the disciples to take in what a Guru can pass onto them. For this to take place, it has to be a sacred relationship

of respect and unconditional obedience, which has been the guiding force in every branch of learning in traditional India. Also, there is a commonality in the approach of the great gurus of different art forms and if the disciple is a real seeker, the journey along with guru would be through the greatest nuances of the art form and the beyond.

The musical gharanas of north Indian or Hindustani classical music have also contributed to the diversity of their form of music by presenting a distinct style of it. These Gharānās or the ‘households’ of specific styles of music have preserved and distilled the unique principles of Rāgas through Guru-shishya lineage.

### **The Origin and Historical Development of Different Forms of Indian Music**

The origin of Indian music can be traced back to the chanting of Vedic hymns and *mantras*. The Chāndogya Upanishad talks about the seven styles of *gāna* (musical modes), highlighting the importance of *Svara* (phonemes) of a Vedic *mantra* that should be pronounced with absolute accuracy. The impact will only be then felt.<sup>3</sup> This Upanishad further states that the innermost self (*ātman*) of all *svara* is the chief Vedic God Indra.<sup>4</sup>

In the post-Vedic age came the NāṭyaŚāstra, one of the ancient most compendium on Indian art forms. It was compiled between 200 BCE to 200 CE. It is said that NāṭyaŚāstra author, the sage Bharata Muni, created the Nāṭya (theatre) by integrating speech from the Rīg Veda, music from the Sāma Veda, acting from the Yajur Veda, and emotions from the Atharva Veda. This further contributed to the tradition of Gandharva Veda - the Vedic science of music.

Another distinction, concerning the ritualized chanting of Vedas and the singing style of performing arts that might have existed around the 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE is noted by Acharya Abhinavagupta of Kashmir. He mentions

**We adore that *Nāda Brahman*,  
that essence of delight manifests as  
primordial sound, that nondual, who  
is the conscious core of all created  
things, who has brought forth the  
world out of its own very Self.**

**- Sarangdev in *Sangeet Ratnākara*,  
13<sup>th</sup> Century CE<sup>2</sup>**



the difference between the religious Gāndharva and the universal Dhruva-gāna.

One of the earliest references of Rāgas used in the Indian classical music can be found in the Buddhist textual sources. The 10<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of CharyāGītī (performance-songs) obtained from Tibet, is attributed to the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE Mahasiddhas Sarahapa. In this text, we find the mention of classical music Rāgas such as Bhairavi and Gurjari.<sup>5</sup> In various parts of the Himalayan region of India and Nepal, where Mahayana-Vajrayana Buddhism is prevalent, the recitation and performance of texts of Charyā Gītī and Nritya are still being practised.

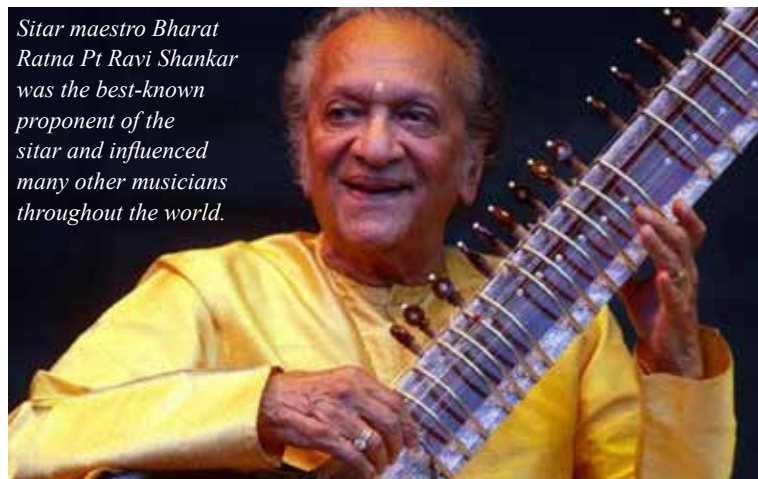
In the southern part of India, Prabandha-gāna was the popular performing genre that existed between the 11<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The word Prabandha, connotes a well-bound composition. Each Prabandha, it is said, was exhaustive and would take several years to master. It was the Prabandha tradition that gradually influenced the emergence of two associated, yet distinctive, styles of classical music that are now known as Hindustani and Carnatic music.

In the northeastern region of India, with the efforts of 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> century saint-scholar of the Vaishnava tradition, Srimanta Sankardev, a figure of importance in the cultural and religious history of Assam, a cultural reformation

took place and the traditions of the past were revived. He devised new forms of music (Borgeet), and dance (Sattriya). These classical musical and dance traditions helped in consolidating the Indian cultural contact with its northeastern region even further. Moreover, the Vaishnava tradition of the northeast further refined the performances of Bengali devotional music.

Sikhism is perhaps the only religion that uses music as its chief mode of worship, where poetic teachings of Gurus, composed in classical music, are used as prayer and offering. Using different styles, the Sikh Kirtans are rendered in the Rāga and Tāla of Indian classical music. This music is used as a direct means for formal worship. In the Guru Granth Sahib, the notation of thirty-one Rāgas of Classical music has been supplied with necessary particulars.

There is a popular perception that music is forbidden in Islam. However, this prohibition of music in Islam is contextual. The prohibition is applicable only when the music is associated with the worldly temptation and it becomes an obstacle to meditate upon the transcendental reality of Allah. Nevertheless, music has been honoured and incorporated in dervish dances or qawwali singing by the Sufi mystics for triggering their consciousness to its union with the divine supreme.



*Sitar maestro Bharat Ratna Pt Ravi Shankar was the best-known proponent of the sitar and influenced many other musicians throughout the world.*



*Bharat Ratna Madurai Shanmukhavadivu Subbulakshmi, the flawless singer of Carnatic music had a voice with a divine power. MS Subbulakshmi didn't contain herself with just music, she also forayed into the field of acting as well.*





Thus, Indian classical music has contributed in a significant way towards the development of the composite culture of India. Besides, with regards to Indian classical music, it should be noted that the term 'classical' only suggests that it has its foundations in the standard convention or *shāstra*, in accordance with the textual tradition. The Indian name for this music is ShāstriyaSangīt. It is sometimes also known as RāgaSangīt since it is the Rāga that is at the centre of the structure of this art form. Thus, the term 'classical' doesn't connote any old style or a specific time period, as the way it exists in the Western tradition.

### Embracing Pluralism and Particularism

Though spirituality has been the unifying factor for different disciplines of Indian classical music, India is endowed with a rich and diverse musical heritage. Its musical diversity is also marked by its geography and culture. Another reason behind this diversity amongst different forms of musical traditions can be attributed to the uniqueness of ethnicity across Indian subcontinent. The ancient text Nāṭyashāstra has recorded this distinctness and categorised these traditions giving them a geographical or ethnic label. In the Nāṭyashāstra, the musical style of northern India is mentioned as 'Udīchya' while the musical style that was prevalent in the deccan region is recorded as

the Āndhriya. Thus, there exists a socio-cultural context for the diversity of Indian classical music.

### The Emergence of Khayāl Music

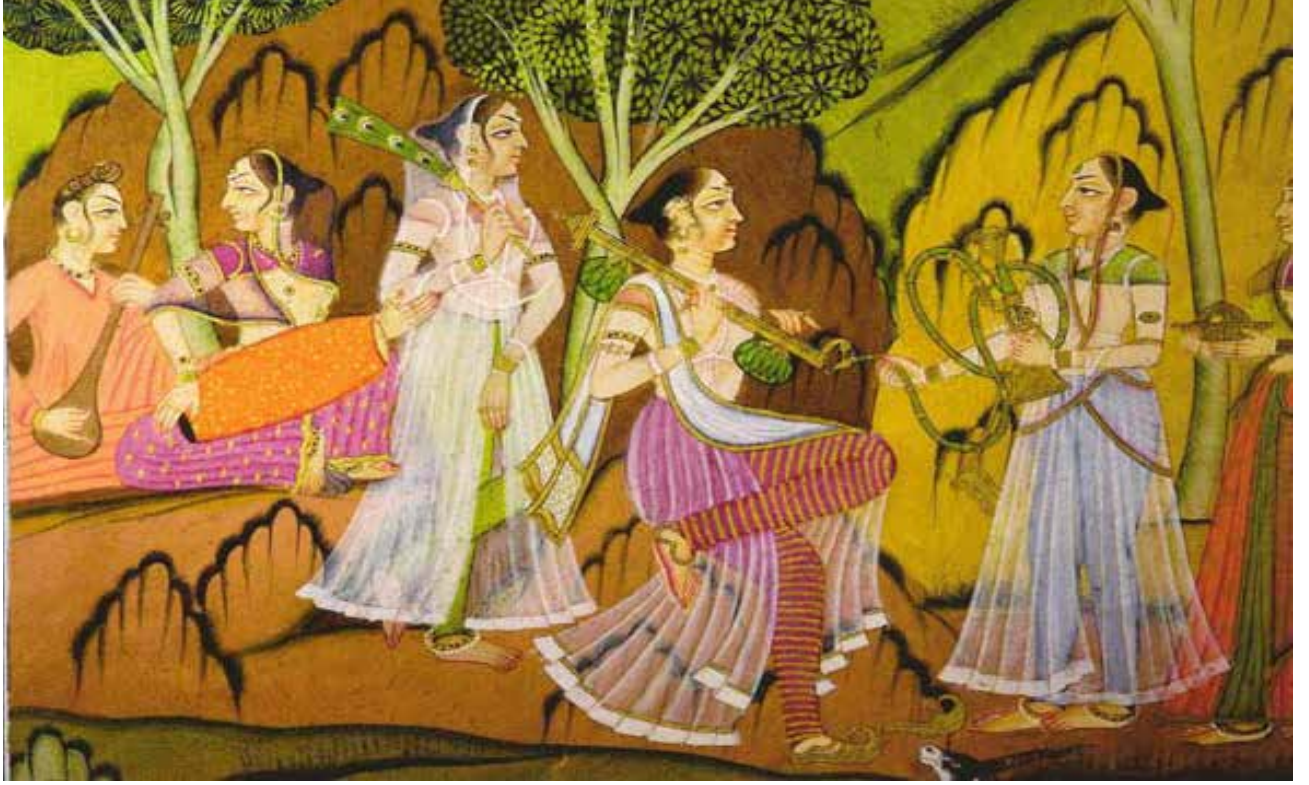
The development of Khayāl style of Hindustani music appears around the time period of the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE. Historically, its popularity coincided with the breaking down of the Mughal empire and the rise of *rīti* (romantic) poetry of Hindi literature. The Khayāl style, which was an offshoot of its precursor classical music form called Dhrupad, particularly suited to the courtesans who preserved and served the classical music and dance to their customers in a rather mundane context. This was the time when the Dhrupad musical repertoires, may have been transformed through radical changes in style, tempo, function, and ideology.

Majority of Khayāl artists were Muslims and much of its technical vocabulary is derived from Urdu. Although, Khayāl has been developed as a structured and systematic form of classical musical tradition, yet most of its terminologies come from the vernacular languages.

### Rāgamālā: Visual Art and Classical Music

A typical example of the amalgamation of Indian classical music with visual art and poetry was the





*A painting depicting characters playing various music instruments*

evolution of Rāgamālā ('garlands of musical modes') painting series of medieval India. It was a form of Indian miniature painting that depicted various Indian musical modes or Rāgas. Although, there exists some arbitrariness in the scenes of these paintings, as their depiction and the colourful palette may not match with the prescribed colour of a Rāga, the way they are mentioned in the canonical texts of music, yet these paintings are considered to be an indulgent imagination and testimony of creativity of the Indian artistic tradition.

### **The Purity of Svara: Unifying Factor of Indian Classical Music**

Another unifying factor of different forms of Indian classical music is the emphasis on the purity of Svara (musical note). The text Sangeet Ratnakar gives the etymological meaning of Svara as- *swayamevaranjanjayititswara*. The term "Sva" stands for 'self', and "Ra", stands for 'shining forth'. So, the *atman* or Self is expected to shine through the Svara. The great Dhrupad maestro, Ustad Rahimuddin Khan Dagar famously said, '*SwarusikāśacchhājiskāImānschā*' (if you are truthful then only you will get true Svara).

There is a lovely story on the purity of Svara. It was revealed by one of the greatest exponents of Hindustani music of our times, Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar.<sup>6</sup>

Once, while wandering in the jungles close to Indore, Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar heard a Sanyasi

ॐ तत्सद्ब्रह्मणे नमः ।  
 श्रीनिःशङ्कशार्ङ्गदेवप्रणीतः  
 संगीतरत्नाकरः ।  
 चतुरकल्लिनाथविरचितकलानिध्याख्यटीकासमेतः ।  
 प्रथमः स्वराध्यायः ।  
 तत्राऽऽदिमं पदार्थसंग्रहाख्यं प्रकरणम् ।  
 कर्णालम्बितकम्बलाध्वतरयोर्गीतामृतास्वादना-  
 दान्दोलीकृतमौलिनिर्गनदीतारङ्गपाटश्रियः ।  
 नृत्यचन्द्रकलाकलापरिलसद्ब्रह्माण्डखण्डान्तरं  
 तं तूर्यत्रयपोपरूपवपुषं वन्दे भवानीपतिम् ॥ १ ॥  
 विघ्नौघहारिणं सर्वभक्ताभिमतकारिणम् ।  
 वारणास्यमहं वन्दे मौलवर्धेन्दुभारिणम् ॥ २ ॥  
 बाणि वीणालसद्वाणि पञ्चाशद्वर्णरूपिणि ।  
 पादानतमुरश्रेणि निवासं कुरु मन्मुखे ॥ ३ ॥  
 वन्दे वेदार्थतत्त्वज्ञं भुक्तिमुक्तिप्रदर्शकम् ।  
 सर्वांगमविदं नित्यं चन्द्रभूषणदेशिकम् ॥ ४ ॥

*Manuscript of Sangeet Ratnakar granth in Sanskrit. This granth is the basis of Northern as well as Southern Indian music methodology. It was written by Pt. Sharangdev in 13<sup>th</sup> century.*

singing in a temple in ruins. He was awestruck by the intensity of the voice; he also saw this miracle that the ruined temple was sparkling like ablaze. Profoundly moved and shaken by this experience, he asked the Sanyasi whether he could learn this intense form of singing and whether the Sanyasi would accept him as a disciple. Seeing the Sanyasi's reluctance, Panditji said that he was ready to quit everything, and even wanted to become a Sanyasi, if that would lead him to get such power in his singing. "No", answered the Sanyasi, "it is when you get this quality in your Svara that you will have already become a Sanyasi". It isn't by turning into a Sanyasi that one can procure profound force and power in the Svara.

As one gets connected with the within using the Svaraas a means, the Self begins to shine through the music. It is the pure Svara of a practitioner that makes the music significant.

### Conclusion

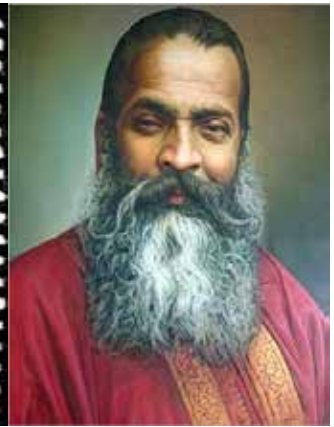
Thus, we can observe that the specific cultural forms and historical traditions have contributed to the emergence of epistemological diversity of Indian music. This has resulted in the development of distinctive world-views that outline the cultural framework and assumptions behind the production of Indian classical music. It is also reflected that spirituality has constantly remained the underlying core principle of this music. Moreover, we also need to be



Allauddin Khan, also known as Baba Allauddin Khan (8 October 1862 – 6 September 1972) was a Bengali Indian Sarod player and multi-instrumentalist, composer and one of the most notable music teachers of the 20th century in Indian classical music.



Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar was a Hindustani musician. He sang the original version of the bhajan Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram, and founded the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya in 1901.



a true seeker with some amount of faith and patience so that we can have some glimpses of the heights to which Indian classical music can take us to. □

### Endnotes

1. Dhāraṇa 18, Verse 41 *VijñānaBhairava Tantra* states *Tantrīyādi vādyasābdeaudirgheṣukramasamsthiteh/Ananyacetāapratyant eparavyomavapurbhavet*. The renowned musicologist, Thakur Jaideva Singh comments on this verse, "When the struck sound of instrumental music stops, it still vibrates in the memory. If the yogi does not allow his mind to wander to something else, but concentrate on the echo of the music, he will be absorbed in the source of all sound, viz; parāvāk and thus will acquire the nature of Bhairava". See, Jaideva Singh. 2010. *Vijnanabhairava or Divine Consciousness*.
2. *Caitanyaasarbhuṭānāvivataajagadātmā/nādabrahmatadānand amadvitīyamupāśmahe*, see, *Sangeet Ratnakar*, 1.3.1. p.62.
3. A phoneme is a unit of sound that distinguishes one word from another in a particular language.
4. *Chāndogya Upanishad* 2.23.3-4. See, Andre Padoux. 1990. *Vac: The concept of word*, p. 17.
5. Scholars such as Rahul Sankriyana dated this text to be composed in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE.
6. See, Alaap: A Discovery of Indian Classical Music, pp.34-35.

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2. *Sangeet Ratnakar of Sarangdev*. 1940.. Madras: Adyar Library.
3. Singh, Jaideva. 2010. *Vijnana Bhairava or Divine Consciousness*. Delhi: MLBD Publications.
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